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ABSTRACT

Language acquisition theory and classroom applications are discussed, with a focus on the role of speaking and grammar in the early stages of English acquisition in the English-speaking elementary school setting (kindergarten and first grade). Three stages of natural language acquisition are: (1) the comprehension stage (preproduction--characterized by pointing, nodding, naming), (2) the early speech stage (characterized by yes/no responses and listing words), and (3) the speech emergence stage (characterized by phrases and sentences without fluency). Since listening ability is the basis for speaking ability, the natural approach to teaching language starts with comprehension rather than production. Techniques used in the natural approach to language acquisition at Loara Elementary School, Anaheim, California, are described. A useful technique in developing listening comprehension through motor activities is "Total Physical Response." It starts with the imperative (command) (e.g., stand up, sit down) and provides students with ample comprehensible input in a low anxiety situation. The language experience approach, which encourages students to express thoughts and feelings stimulated by an experience, uses concrete manipulatives and sensory channels (e.g., eyes, hands). Ideas for implementing the natural approach are appended. (SW)

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Putting Language Acquisition Theory to Practice in the Classroom

by Carmen T. Elenbaas

I'm Carmen Elenbaas, and I have been a bilingual/multicultural education teacher for the past ten years in Anaheim. I'm also a Spanish instructor at Cal Poly Pomona, having taught there for the past four years, and I'm also an ESL instructor, for the North Orange County Community College District, Adult Education Division.

The intent of this presentation is to discuss language acquisition theory and putting it into practice in the classroom. This presentation will discuss the theory of language acquisition and learning, and the role of speaking and grammar in the early stages of English acquisition in an English-speaking elementary school environment, grades K and First.

We define acquisition as the unconscious absorption of the rules of the structure of a language.

Learning, on the other hand, results from the conscious focus on rules and their application in speech.

Acquisition takes place if the following conditions are met:
1. Attention is focused on the message, not the form.
2. Communication of information has taken place.

For example I am going to speak to you in Tagalog, and by focusing attention on the message you will understand what I am saying.

Will demonstrate using Tagalog.

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Noam Chomsky, the Father of Linguistics says that the difference between language acquired by humans and animals is the Language Acquisition Device. All children are born with this Language Acquisition Device, and that there is no reason to suppose that this device can be used for only one language.

Children, in the natural process of language acquisition of their native language, have access to an enormous amount of linguistic data. Parents, siblings, all the people around them speak the language constantly. They start out with the human disposition and the ability to learn, but no knowledge whatsoever; in fact, they have to learn what language is used for. So, they must learn two things at the same time:
1. How language functions.
2. How it is used to create contact with the world around them.

Babies for the first six months are the same, the babbling and cooing stage. Around seven months, there is an important change. They haven't learned words but they have learned intonation patterns. If the baby produces the right combinations of sounds, the child is rewarded. The right noises for the child's particular "home" language.

Samoan---16 different phonemes
Hawaiian---13 different phonemes
Spain---23 different phonemes
Spanish America---21 different phonemes (No [th] nor [ly]
English---36-50 separate sounds(phonemes)---depending on where you come from.

Think about a child learning ESL---nearly triple his ability. A Spanish speaking child has to double his ability.

If we waited for babies to learn all the sounds of language before words, and learn a large number of words before sentences, we wouldn't know people who could talk till they are twenty-five. Babies learn at multiple levels at the same time. While practicing sounds they hear words and sentences, and a lot of learning is going on. Children are learning at multiple levels at the same time.

Perhaps, the most important aspect of learning one's native language is the fact that it is a natural process. According to Dr. Tracy Terrell, the natural order of language acquisition is "built-in" if there is enough comprehensible input.

How is input made comprehensible? There are three important elements to making input comprehensible:

1. Content---everything said has real referents---they can be seen and reacted to.
2. Intent---before starting, state what one will talk about and what is expected.
3. Key Vocabulary---Key and content words are emphasized by intonation, pauses, gestures.

Acquirers of language go through Three Stages of language acquisition, on their way to gaining proficiency in the communication skills which are listening/comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing.

The Three Stages of Natural Language Acquisition are:

1. The Comprehension Stage (Pre-Production---characterized by pointing, nodding, naming, shaking one's head.)
2. The Early Speech Stage (Early Production---characterized by yes/no responses and listing words.)
3. The Speech Emergence Stage(Characterized by phrases and sentences. but by no means fluency in syntax and sentence structure. Fluency comes later.

The basic tenet is that acquirers of language, if given enough comprehensible input, will teach themselves how to talk. For this reason, creating communicative situations in the classroom in which the student is "bathed" in comprehensible input is the goal for the first two stages of Natural Language Acquisition.

The affective filter must also be down, that is, a low anxiety situation with respect to language should exist.

Dr. Stephen Krashen, and Dr. Tracy Terrell recommend that elementary school ESL teachers concentrate on <u>receptive comprehensible input</u>, rather than expressive language, so that students can begin to make use of sources of input outside the classroom, such as the playground, school community, neighborhood, shopping centers.

Of all the language skills, the listening/comprehension skill is the most important to beginners. Evidence shows that it is this skill which underlies speech, and likewise, if one does not comprehend responses from native speakers, then production skills will be of reduced value. Therefore, listening comprehension is a skill that needs to be developed for practical considerations, which are:

1. Students won't progress in academic subjects till they can <u>understand</u>

what the teacher is saying.
2. Outside the classroom, students won't be able to integrate well with other students till they can understand what others are saying.
3. In neither the classroom nor outdoors is it necessary to speak in order to understand.

Hence, listening comprehension is theoretically important. As pointed earlier, listening ability is the basis for speaking ability. A student must understand key words in order to understand what the teacher or other students are saying. With the meaning of key words in context. a student can guess what the other words mean.

When the parents teach language to children, they are really teaching children to listen and to understand.

When children learn their first language, (native language) they are given a long period before they are expected to say anything. They are given from six months to one year to concentrate on comprehensible strategies. They use this time to build confidence that they can interpret the speech they hear---not that they understand every word---but that they can follow what's going on and what's being asked of them.

In the Natural Approach to the acquisition of language, we, teachers, have tried to develop these "natural" techniques or strategies that allows us to start with comprehension and not with production.

Speech production comes slowly and should never be forced. The consequences of forced production before comprehension are:
1. The student makes more mistakes.
2. The student relies heavily on translating from his native language.
3. The student's progress is hindered.

Speech will emerge when the students have a need to communicate; when they are provided with opportunities to express themselves in low anxiety situations; when they are provided with comprehensible input.

I will briefly discuss some techniques that we use in the Natural Approach to language acquisition at Loara Elementary School in Anaheim.

A technique that is very useful in developing listening comprehension through motor activities, is TPR, Total Physical Response. Asher's contribution to language teaching is at last being recognized and most teachers use TPR at least to some extent. It works and it's fun. It is totally physical, as the name implies, and it starts with the imperative (command)---stand up, sit down, put your hand on your head, turn around, raise your hand(s), lower your hand(s), put your hand over your eye, put your right hand over your left eye, put your left hand on your right eye, put your right hand on your mouth, put both hands on your nose, put your right hand on your left shoulder, touch your left leg, etc.

The success of TPR, as well as any other listening comprehension technique lies in the way the teacher presents the commands. The commands need to be modeled with an intonation which stresses the most important word in the command. They must also be introduced at such a pace that the students can have enough practice with each command before a new one is introduced. Be sure to weave review material with new material.

TPR gives instant feedback to the teacher, with many positive rewards for the students. It provides the students with lots of comprehensible input in a low anxiety situation. Eventually, the students will carry out the commands without the teacher model.

In the Pre-Production Stage of Language Acquisition use questions such as:

"Who has the book?" "crayon?" "pencil?"
"Where is the chair?" "table?" "desk?"
"Does she/he have a shirt?" "blouse?" "jacket?"

The student names or points, nods, shakes his/her head or answers yes/no.

In the Early Production Stage of Language Acquisition make use of either/or questions such as:

"Is this a cookie or a cupcake?"
"Is this an apple or an orange?"
"What is this?"
"What is that?"

Begin a statement and indicate by intonation that someone should finish it. For example:

"Is this a book?" "No, it's not a book, it's a notebook."
"Is this a red crayon?" "No, it's not a red crayon, it's a yellow crayon."

Use questions to be answered by two, three word phrases. For example:

"What is she/he doing?"
"She/he is eating."
"She/he is sleeping."
"She/he is running."
"She/he is playing."
"She/he is studying."

The Language Experience Approach which utilizes concrete manipulatives and our sensory input channels---eyes, ears, hands, nose, mouth, is an excellent method to use in putting language acquisition theory into classroom practice. Students are encouraged to express thoughts, ideas and feelings stimulated by an experience. After an experience has been presented and discussed, the teacher records the students' dictated ideas, thoughts or feelings on a large chart paper to compose a short story. You record the dictation exactly as the student says with his/her own words. You read the story back to the students and then you and the students read the story together. Based on these student dictated stories a teacher can begin to develop decoding and encoding skills:

---recognizing words
---phonetic analysis
---structural analysis
---word meanings
---capitalization
---punctuation

Bloom's Taxonomy

All students need to feel that they belong to a group and that they can expect small success. They need to look forward to their new language acquisition with a feeling of pleasure and joy and not one of fear.

We must not lose sight of the fact that there is a positive transfer of literacy skills from one language to another.

We, teachers and educators, need to have at our command a whole grab-bag of techniques as well as skills in switching techniques even within a single lesson, in order to provide for different student backgrounds and styles of learning.

We need the courage to discard non-productive theories and to question panaceas and slogans. We need the confidence in ourselves to develop our own fortes and to constantly live a commitment to teaching and to the idea that all human beings can learn.

Ideas for Implementing the Natural Approach

I. Materials
- A. Books
- B. Magazines-catalogs
- C. Picture Files

II. ESL Center
- A. Independent
- B. Aide, cross-age tutor

III. Cooking
- A. Hot or cold dishes
- B. Language Experience Stories

IV. Field Trips
- A. Grocery Store
- B. Post Office
- C. Any neighborhood/community place

V. Nursery Rhymes
- A. Manipulative parts
- B. Intonation---Culture

VI. Stories
- A. Flannel Board/Puppets
- B. Dramatizations

VII. Murals
- A. Directed
- B. Independent

VIII. Music
- A. Manipulatives
- B. Charts

IX. Art Projects
- A. Seasonal
- B. Topical
- C. Clay
- D. Paper Mache
- E. Cut and Paste

X. Organization
- A. Grouping
- B. Instruction

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